

# We want ourselves alive and debt free!

Jo Littler interviews Verónica Gago

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Verónica Gago is Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina and author of *Neoliberalism From Below* (Duke 2017); *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (Verso 2020); and, with Lucí Cavallero, *A Feminist Theory of Debt* (Pluto, 2021). She is one of the active members of the grassroots feminist movement Ni Una Menos, founded by a group of artists, activists and academics in Argentina. Ni Una Menos has described itself as a ‘collective scream against machista violence’. It has regularly held protests against femicides, and has connected femicide to a range of other issues, including sexual harassment, abortion and reproductive rights, transgender and sex worker rights, the gender pay gap, gender roles, neoliberalism and debt.<sup>1</sup> Its first demonstration was organised in the wake of a 14-year old pregnant girl, Chiara Paez, being beaten to death by her boyfriend, in Buenos Aires in 2015. This brought together 200,000 people. In 2016 the movement came to wider attention on social media through the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, and protests spread throughout Latin America, particularly in Chile, Uruguay and Peru, where it prompted what has been described as the largest demonstration in Peruvian history. In 2016 Ni Una Menos launched a national women’s strike. After sustained campaigning, in 2020 abortion became legal in Argentina; and in 2021 a law was passed giving employment rights to travestis and trans people. Its campaigns to reclaim rights and resources continue. In this interview, conducted in July 2021, Jo Littler talks to Verónica Gago about Ni Una Menos, her work and activism.

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**Jo Littler:** *In your book Feminist International you discuss being inspired by Rosa Luxemburg’s words, ‘every strike takes on its own character’. You use this idea to theorise*

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*the women's strike and the Ni Una Menos movement more broadly. Could you outline their 'character' for us here?*

**Verónica Gago:** The first demonstrations in 2015 were saying 'stop the femicide'. That was the main characteristic of the first major mobilisation. Then after that first year the movement became more complex. It started to think about how to connect together different *kinds* of violence against women: to try to get a more complex idea of this web of violence. It started to think about what constituencies and subjects were involved - lesbian, trans, and travestis - or what the movements were within the movement. So, after that first year we were becoming engaged with more complex ways to conceptualise violence. And then by 2016 I think we were realising how to *connect* different kinds of violence, especially through the tool of the feminist strike. I think the movement was becoming a way to make sense of the connection between violence against women and travestis and police violence, and economic and financial violence. The movement has been building a common sense about what this kind of *machista* violence means for certain bodies and certain territories. We have been creating a very slow, but at the same time very large, movement which was connecting these different sorts of violence. It was a sort of pedagogical exercise: one which would discuss, but also produce, assemblies and organise transnational forms of coordination which would go beyond the idea of 'ni una menos'. It was like we stopped, and thought, 'well, we want ourselves alive; but we also want ourselves to be debt-free'.

So we started to go beyond a very narrow narrative of gender violence. I think what has also been very important for us is how this movement has built so many Latin American and global connections. Over the last five years, I have increasingly been talking about it as a 'massive' feminism, a feminism of the masses. This is a new cycle of feminism. Of course, we have different lines and genealogies of feminism, but I think that the very novelty of this feminist movement is its *massive* feature. We are, all the time, producing these significant events but also conducting forms of political work which organise feminism as an everyday practice. And we are also continually doing political work to connect different organisations and different conflicts. I think it is very impressive how in the last two years feminism has become a very important term in the different political struggles in Latin America. For example in Chile, in Ecuador, in Colombia, where you have different uprisings, strikes and popular demonstrations, feminism has had a very important role in

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terms of organisation and vocabulary; in terms of doing and practising politics in other ways.

*Both the movement and your writings emphasise the relationship between gendered violence, disenfranchisement and neoliberal financialisation, and break new ground in drawing these themes together. 'The debt is owed to us' is a hugely powerful slogan used by Ni Una Menos. Can you summarise what it means, how it evolved and has been used?*

I think that the question of debt and financialisation is for us the key issue which connects a reading of neoliberalism to the feminist movement. It's not just an analytical framework that we are using; it's a very concrete comprehension of how these different forms of violence are entangled and embedded in our everyday life. Debt is especially important, because on the one hand it's a more abstract form of violence, but at the same time it's become so much more widely extended today through massive impoverishment. So, we started work with this slogan - *we want ourselves alive and debt free* - and started considering different debates and ways of connecting domestic or household debt with different aspect of violence.

A key question for us was: how can we organise a demonstration against debt? By the time of the strike in 2020 the common slogan we were using was, 'The debt is owed to us' ('La deuda es con nosotres'). It was a way to change or to shift the sense of what debt is. We conducted different kinds of demonstrations in front of the Central Bank, and in a variety of different political spaces, to connect the issue of the public debt with domestic debt. We were campaigning to reclaim public services, and also to reclaim public budgets - to reclaim them against the corporate exploitation of, for example, food and medicine during the pandemic. Over the last year or so we have also been reconnecting the issue of debt with the question of housing, especially against eviction.

The slogan 'The debt is owed to us' has been a device to rethink economic and especially financial violence and to show how this violence is practised against certain bodies and particular territories. Another key aspect of this political and conceptual work is to show how these forms of environmental extraction against common resources and territories are also bound up with what I call financial extractivism. The household debt is a political device, as are new forms of labour exploitation. The slogan enables all these things - which are not always obvious - to

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be shown as issues that are on the feminist agenda, and translates these problems into a demand of the movement. *The debt is owed to us.*

*Ni Una Menos's movement against gendered violence is very inclusive (of women, lesbians, trans people and travestis) and radical; and in discussing this you have written that it is a hackneyed argument that to be inclusive 'it must moderate and soften its demands'. How important is this combination in the movement's success? And to what extent do you think the success of this double move - inclusive solidarity and bold demands - is an effective general recipe, or particularly conducive in Latin America?*

Well, I don't know, but I think that here in Latin America, and in Argentina in particular, this building of transversality - the inclusion of different political actors and different political conflicts within the movement - has been very important in building its size, its massiveness. Because, of course, there are the very important, and traditional, feminist organisations; and there are the historical feminist dynamics; but we also need to go beyond this 'sectorial' definition of feminism, and start to think of feminism as a political praxis in each different space: for example, in unions, in political organisations, in social movements, in schools and universities, in communitarian spaces. It was very interesting to see how in those different spaces, people began to ask, 'what kind of feminism are we developing?' or, 'what kind of feminism are we trying to develop?' or, 'what are the features of feminism that we have to develop in our own organisations?'

Thinking in terms of feminism as a zone of conflict was very important for this kind of politics of inclusion, as it was trying to go beyond a merely formal idea of alliances between different forces or organisations. I think that its scale, its massiveness, shapes its political capacity to produce proximity between very different organisations and very different struggles; which also - and I think this is a question that you are interested in, in how to build solidarity - involves going beyond formal mechanisms of solidarity, to try to produce this more dense idea of coordination, transversality and massiveness.

*Was it ever easy?!*

No, no, no, all the time it involves very complicated articulations and a *lot* of political work. And it does not always function, or function well. But I think we felt

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feminism as a common force. And a force that you can translate into your own space and your own experience, and can have internal battles around in your organisation, was key in producing this idea of inclusion, of being part. And it is the movement that gives you force or strength in your own organisation, but also means that you can be part of a movement *beyond* your own organisation. I think this double move has been both very amazing and very important for a new generation of feminist leaders in popular and community organisations, unions, social movements, student networks, migrant collectives. And it is also a political experience of subjectivity for a very new generation which is outside traditional political organisations. They are building new collectives and developing a new sense of what organisation means, which has to do with, to quote Sara Ahmed, the question of how to live a feminist life in a collective dimension.<sup>2</sup> That of course is not easy; but it is an exercise which is a new articulation, and which goes beyond the idea of coalition, as it is not so formal as a coalition - it is a *movement*. And so it's trying to rethink the idea of radical inclusion, in the sense of enlarging definitions of feminism in a very practical way.

*I love the geographical scope of Feminist International, and I wondered if you could say something about the potential and the challenges in this regard? So, how international is it at the moment? What are the possibilities, what are the challenges?*

I think that if we have to name the salient features of this cycle of this movement, its internationalism is one of its most distinctive features. Massiveness and internationalism are both very important forces of this movement and both are related. In terms of ridding ourselves of neoliberalism, and ridding ourselves of financial capitalism, one question is: how can we confront this globalisation of capital from our concrete and situated struggles? At the same time, we can also think about how, for example, in one year the movement is very strong in Argentina and in Italy; and in the next year, the movement is especially strong in Spain; and in another two months, a movement arises in Mexico, and then Chile is in the front line. So we can also connect, and *feel*, that we are part of this movement that has different rhythms and forms of accumulation. And I think this idea of being part of a movement that is not always in your country, or in your geographical space, but that you feel that you are *in*, is very important. In other words it has been important to rethink the idea of concrete internationalism: it's not an abstract structure that we are, or are not, part of. And the ubiquity of feminism nowadays is an effect of these struggles.

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Its strength also has to do with a capacity to reorganise our political agenda in terms of the conjuncture. For example, during the pandemic, all the dimensions of feminism against the precariousness of life and all the vocabulary about care and reproductive labour was a part of international exchanges which could produce a diagnosis. But it was also connecting different struggles - from domestic work to migrant collectives, from struggles against evictions to struggles against neo-extractivism - in order to reframe the idea of crisis. So, I think that this dimension of internationalism is also the plane where a common diagnosis is elaborated that is all the time expanding its vocabularies, and its comprehensions of violence, and also its political force, in order to organise different measures that translate this diagnosis into concrete action.

*So, Latin America was one of the early neoliberal test-beds or starting grounds. Do you think it will be one of the places from which it ends? That is my very hopeful question.*

Well, we are very confident with our comrades in Chile especially, where effectively neoliberalism started with the Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship.<sup>3</sup> I think that here in Latin America we have a very strong archive of the origins of neoliberalism as a fascist regime, because the different dictatorships - especially, but not only, the forms of state terrorism in Chile and Argentina - have been intimately linked to neoliberalism. We do not have the experience of a 'liberal' neoliberalism or a 'progressive' neoliberalism. We intimately understand what violence, conservatism and fascism has to do with neoliberalism, because, from the beginning, our experience in the region has been an experience of neoliberalism combined with state terrorism. Neoliberal violence is not something that comes later, as a sort of deviation from 'original' neoliberalism. And I think we also can read neoliberalism itself in these forty years as a different reaction to different types of struggles. We are now seeing an alliance between neoliberalism and conservatism as a reaction to this massive feminism movement. We can see the impact of feminism in connecting migration, anti-extractivism, different popular indigenous struggles, against a very conservative and racist management of the crisis. We are now witnessing very important struggles in our region against neoliberalism, against tax reforms, against the police, against different types of extractivism against populations. And we are also trying to discuss how neoliberalism is also a battleground of different subjectivities - subjectivities that feminism, and especially transfeminism, are developing.

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So I think this double movement for and against neoliberalism is very much at the frontline of different struggles in Latin America or, more accurately, to go beyond the colonial name, Abya Yala. We are in a very dramatic moment in terms of impoverishment, in terms of repression, in terms of the militarisation of regions. But, at the same time, *it is not pacified*. The different conservative and neoliberal powers cannot pacify this region. It is not easy to establish a government authority that can establish austerity and can establish fear. All the time, different movements, mobilisations and different uprisings are emerging. There is no pacification at all.

*You follow Rosa Luxemburg's complication of reform or revolution and her notion of 'revolutionary realpolitik' - so left political pragmatics from below. How does it move beyond the strike? Can you talk about the relationship between the strike, the state, and political party politics?*

In Argentina this is a very important issue because here the feminist movement has always historically had a very complex ideological composition. There are different comrades in the feminist movement who are also within a very wide range of political parties - from the left wing all the way to Peronism.<sup>4</sup> I think it was easier when the strike was developed against the previous government - the [right-wing] Macri government - because that regime was very clearly neoliberal.<sup>5</sup> He took on the biggest external debt in national history, as well as the biggest debt created by the IMF in its own history. It was easier for us to create this coalition, and to generate a very big movement which included political parties from the left alongside Peronist parties, when the confrontation was with this very neoliberal government. Nowadays the composition of the movement is very different to two years ago. In the first place this is because of the change of the government [Argentina has had a centre-left government since 2019] and secondly it is because of the pandemic. The last strike was in 2020, just a few days before the pandemic started, and now all the different organisations within our popular feminist network are focused on dealing with that crisis. So I think the relationship between political parties and the feminist movement is also now in a very difficult and dynamic position in terms of the conjunctural conditions. That also has to do with other elements: the composition of forces between political parties and social movements and the scenario where some social movements are also part of political fronts.

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*Could you say a bit more about what has happened since the advent of Covid?*

In Argentina, in the first year of the pandemic, a lot of different popular and feminist networks and organisations were co-ordinating campaigns to reclaim and improve the wages of care workers. Plus in the first year of the pandemic there was a very important campaign for abortion rights. Last December a law was passed that made abortion legal on demand for the first time ever in Argentina.<sup>6</sup> It was a very important victory after the green tide and all the militant efforts over so many years. We carried out different kinds of actions, trying to make issues visible, and to organise in different spaces and different networks. Last year we created a slogan, 'Nos sostienen las redes feministas', or 'the feminist networks sustain us'. It was a common slogan across the movement, including the unions. We were trying to visualise and *make visible* how the feminist movement was in the frontline of the crisis.

Over the past few months the feminist movement in Argentina has campaigned for employment rights for travestis and trans people. That was achieved: the law was passed two weeks ago. We've also been campaigning to reclaim vaccines for the community, and wages for care workers; and we've been campaigning against the corporate control of food, especially, and against housing evictions. This has been our agenda over the last month. In the midst of the pandemic we have tried all the time to continue organising through assemblies, to connect different conflicts and to *produce* the political agenda. But it is not the same, of course, because up to now our main space has been the street.

*And it's now moved from the street to online?*

Yes. Although it's neither completely 'virtual' or completely 'real', because the networks and the activist initiatives are criss-crossing different territories all the time. It has not been easy to converge and to be together in our massive mobilisation, but we are trying to maintain different assemblies and different networks, and try to organise different kinds of meetings.

*The theme of environmentalism is present in both your work and the movement. For instance in A Feminist Reading Of Debt your interviewees talk about how the purchase of expensive seeds and agrotoxins becomes a cause of debt, unlike in organic farming. You've also discussed the Bolivian dam construction; extractivism; and the mystification of woman*



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*as an exploitable natural resource. So, I wanted to ask you: as the environmental crisis becomes more pressing, how should those demands be extended?*

I think in Latin America the vocabulary of environmentalism has more to do with anti-extractivist struggles than with 'environmentalism'. This vocabulary is changing fast with younger generations. Whilst comrades in other areas talk about eco-feminism, I think that here, in Latin America, the struggles, the vocabulary, the imagery have to do more with the strategies of the anti-extractivism and indigenous movements. There are a lot of very young activists who are making links between environmentalism and feminism, but still I think the question of *extractivism* is the main issue for us in rethinking the exploitation of land, the exploitations of corporations and the distribution of common resources. In Latin America the question of how we can reframe imperialism in terms of a discussion of eco-feminism which also goes beyond the idea of green capitalism, or some sort of 'ecology-light' for consumerism, is a very important issue and debate. The agro-business model is now exploding in terms of environmental problems - both with the basic issues of food and water, and with the dispossession of indigenous people through the expropriation of plants. There is also a very long discussion about the colonial frame of developmentalism in 'the Third World' and the dilemmas related to the international division of labour for our countries. So this genealogy, in terms of indigenous, community and anti-colonial struggles, is very important for us in working out how feminism and ecological demands and struggles are entangled nowadays. Today these different vocabularies are being connected to the crisis of the pandemic.

*I particularly like how your work emphasises interdependence rather than individualism - for example you wrote 'the body never depends solely on itself' (which resonates a bit with what we tried to do in The Care Manifesto, I think, and with Judith Butler's recent work on interdependence and violence).<sup>7</sup> Related to this, you also write about the importance of avoiding cultivating a ranking of suffering, and the frozen categories of "pure victims" (that place where the patriarchy loves to situate us)', and the need to 'politicise violence against women by displacing the status of victimhood'. Can you say more about the dangers of this narrow, individualist anti-contextual presentation of victims - and how to avoid it?*

Yes. I think that going beyond a narrow understanding of victimisation and the

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‘necropolitical’ counting of femicide as our legitimate place of enunciation was very important for the movement.<sup>8</sup> It involves problematising the idea of permanent pain and sorrow; moving beyond that necrological narrative about ourselves. This is in part because we have had the experience of a human rights movement that went beyond the idea of victimisation - in order to reclaim ‘disappeared’ people, and in order to reclaim political and activist and militant trajectories. For us, for the feminist movement in Argentina, as in other parts of Latin America, connecting these trajectories and genealogies of *Madres y Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* and different political organisations related to human rights (but not a liberal definition of human rights!) was very important.<sup>9</sup> It was fundamental to reclaim other subjective frames for pain and violence.

It was also very important to connect the different genealogies of social movements to the feminist movement. We were trying to think: ‘well, we are dispossessed, we are under attack, we are experiencing different kinds of violence, but how do we produce ourselves as a subject of struggle?’ I think this is an open question. We are, all the time, in different situations, trying to rethink how this conflict can be named or narrated as a *political* conflict - not just an individual or interpersonal conflict. I think that making this practice a collective practice is crucial. It’s also the case when we talk about, for example, movements like MeToo. How do we go beyond the idea of personal problematic or interpersonal matters? How do we produce a collective, and also a *political*, diagnosis of this collective matter?

So it was key for us to produce feminism as a political movement and not just as a narrative of victimhood. And in that sense, what you talk about, interdependence, is very important. It’s what we do all the time; and it’s not visible, it’s not recognised, and it’s not named as a part of the political praxis. So, I think this idea of interdependence as political praxis is also very important, although it’s not interdependence in biological terms, it’s in terms of its political dimension.

*Yes, absolutely! My next question is about the relationship between your political activism and your academic work. Your work is very theoretical but also full of very barricade-worthy slogans. It’s also a good mix in terms of showing overlapping contexts and connections and in thinking about intersectional gendered inequalities.*

I worked for many years as a journalist and so I think that I developed a practice

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of writing in ways other than that of a purely academic style. I'm also a member of the independent publisher Tinta Limón, which has produced a range of books and materials from, and for, the social movements.<sup>10</sup> I think what I do is bound up with this experience; but also, in Latin America, there is also a long and expansive tradition that enables the public university to get very close to different popular social movements. The connection between public universities and social movements is very common here. There's a very strong tradition of autonomy in terms of public universities, and of a connection with social movements, with political practice. Not everybody is interested in that, but it's a strong tradition, and nowadays it's important. So I think of writing in terms of political intervention, but also I am very interested in research taking into account political commitment.

*Is journalism something you do alongside academia or were you a journalist before?*

I started when I was a student, as a job, to pay for ... my life! I was very young, I was 22; but also at 20 I started to collaborate in a magazine published by a union and then in different activist publications at the university. So for me it's a practice of writing which has always been a form of political writing. That is, I think, part of my style. But there is also a sense of urgency when you are doing that kind of writing; it's a different temporality than if you are only producing for the academy, for the university. I do like writing in that register too, very much. It's more free, and for a wider public.

*Yes and I think it's healthy to work in different registers and not just to write books.*

Yes!

*How has your background shaped your current concerns?*

My family was always politically engaged. My father and my mother were both militants in the 1970s, so in my home all the time political discussion and political engagement was an ethos. I started to be an activist at university when I was very young. The political tradition of activism is very important in Argentinian history, and for my generation - especially the relationship with the struggles of the 1970s. We are the generation of the sons and daughters of the 1970s militants, and so being

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interested in political action and political debates is a sort of common sense.

At university I was very interested in debates but I was also a very engaged militant. For our generation the Zapatista uprising was very important. It was decisive in terms of rethinking what politics is, and what kind of balance we might create in terms of the politics of emancipation; and in terms of reworking the political tradition from the 1970s in Latin America. I think that it was part of ... yes, a war. It was a form of political pedagogy. And after the Zapatista movement, the crisis in 2001 was crucial, as was the Seattle movement, the Genoa movement, Argentina 2001; and all the different revolts and uprisings in Latin America in 2002 and 2003. I also mentioned earlier the different forms of activism and struggle around human rights in Argentina; for our generation it was very important to denounce the military dictatorship, and to follow this debate and try to understand how democratic transition has to be rethought in terms of the struggles in the 1970s and so on. So, I think that this is what is behind what I do.

*And finally, I have an academic question. Your work draws simultaneously from theory found in international socialist feminist traditions and also post-structuralism, like Deleuze and Guattari, so could you say what this mixture provides and enables?*

What a difficult question! Well, I have been part of different collectives, and I have experience of militant research in Colectivo Situaciones, so I always have this question of how to relate conceptual and theoretical work with praxis, with political engagement. I try all the time to connect my reading with my work as an independent publisher, and my work as a teacher with my political practice. I think that this mixture is what is always, for me, producing a kind of entanglement between concepts. For me it's very important to produce theory within struggle. I feel more comfortable producing within collectives and movements because I think that struggles are always the material space where we can think better. It's also very important to fight against the anti-intellectualism that sometimes surfaces in struggles, in terms of the classical division between who thinks and who acts. I think that is also a very pronounced division here in Latin America; that idea of, 'well here it is, you have the intense experience, you don't need the words, or concepts, because you have the *experience*'. In those terms, 'the theoretical' is always a kind of intrusion against 'real' practice or the intensity of practice. My work is all the time trying to confront this anti-intellectual tradition and at the same time to work

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against the idea of having a theoretical perspective that is completely disembodied from the struggles.

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## Notes

1. For a discussion, see Sara Motta. 'Feminising our revolutions' in *Soundings* 71, 2019.
2. Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke 2017.
3. A few months after this interview took place, the left-wing Social Convergence party won the general election in Chile, and Gabriel Boric became President.
4. Perónism refers to an Argentinian political tradition based on the ideas and legacy of Juan Perón - President in the 1940s and 1970s. Perónism involves a blend of populist politics combined with free market policies, the nationalisation of private industries and union control.
5. Mauricio Macri is a businessman and politician who was President of Argentina between 2015 and 2019 as Leader of the right-wing Republican Proposal Party (PRO), which was founded in 2005. The current President is the centre-left Alberto Fernández from the Justicialist Party (also a Perónist party).
6. Under fourteen weeks.
7. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, Verso 2020; Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, Verso 2020.
8. Necropolitics is the use of political and social power to determine how people live and die, and in particular to rule in such a way that condemns people to terrible lives near that of the living dead, or in 'death worlds'. It is a phrase coined by Achille Mbembe in his article 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, Vol 15 No 1, 2013, pp11-40.
9. Mothers and grandmothers of people who were 'disappeared' under Argentina's military dictatorship which ruled between 1976 and 1983 protested in the Plaza de Mayo in the capital, Buenos Aires. They also formed an NGO campaigning for the children to be found and restored to their families. See <https://abuelas.org.ar/idiomas/english/history.htm>.
10. <https://tintalimon.com.ar/>.